

Surviving in the Suburbios

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Introduction¹

The form of women's participation in casual work² and its implications in terms of their subordination is determined by a complex inter-relationship of economic and non-economic (specifically ideological) factors. This paper utilises a case study from Guayaquil,

Ecuador, to examine (within the framework of one particular peripheral economy) the function and importance of women's work in the survival strategies of low-income households, in a situation, where the majority of men are excluded from secure 'formal' wage-sector employment.

¹This is a considerably abridged version of a paper entitled, 'Women's work in a peripheral economy: the case of poor urban women in Guayaquil, Ecuador', presented at the IDS workshop on Women, the Working Poor and the Informal Sector, April 1980.

²'Casual work' essentially comprises low-income work outside regular wage employment. Bromley and Gerry (1979:5) define it as 'any way of making a living which lacks a moderate degree of security of income and employment'.

The extent to which the industrial wage sector absorbs the active labour force is specific in time and place and dependent on a wide variety of factors at both national and international level. In peripheral economies the tendency is often towards the proletarianisation of a decreasing proportion of the urban labour force.

Large numbers never, of only intermittently enter wage-sector employment, and even then on contractual arrangements designed to ensure that they are excluded from social welfare payments or long-term security. Although the 'informal sector' [Moser 1978] can for a few, be a more profitable source of income than formal sector wage employment [Scott 1979; Schmitz 1981], for the majority the only form of survival is in highly competitive small-scale enterprises producing petty commodities, and underpaid and irregular casual work in a wide variety of marginal service sector activities. In virtually all economies women predominate at the lower end of the labour market where they cluster in specific sectors. Not only are they distributed vertically, that is to say, sex segregated on the basis of gender hierarchy, into lower paid, lower skilled and less managerial work, but they are also distributed horizontally (that is to say, within particular sectors), most obviously in those occupations which are an extension into the market of domestic labour.

Under conditions of severe unemployment or under-employment, or where only a small percentage of the male active labour force is absorbed into the stable wage sector, competition between men and women over work often intensifies. There are significant implications of this in terms of asymmetrical gender relations, and the extent to which these tend to be masked ideologically. It is important therefore to identify the conditions under which competitive pressure results in a change in the sexual division of labour and the 'masculinisation' of traditionally female work areas, or conversely, where the existing sex segregation of occupations is sufficiently powerful to create an inflexibility in the labour market, 'women's work' remaining protected despite a contraction of the labour force [Himmelweit and Mohun 1977:29; Molyneux 1978].

In the following detailed case study of one low-income community in Guayaquil, the question of competition between men and women is examined in two very different and contrasting sectors which provide income-earning opportunities for the majority of women. The first is domestic service, which is termed 'women's work' and consequently remains largely a protected sector; the second is retail selling, where there is no sexual segregation and both men and women work, and where it is necessary to identify both the extent to which they compete, and the manner in which this is masked ideologically. A third and less important sector, tailoring/dressmaking, where men and women work side by side, is also briefly examined in terms of the nature of reciprocal exchange between spouses involved in these activities.

The continuing persistence, rather than decline of petty, often household based enterprises in peripheral

economies has important implications in terms of the role of women's work and the extent to which it is remunerated. In some sectors of production larger enterprises, in adopting strategies to avoid overheads, labour legislation and industrial expansion have encouraged increased fragmentation of the labour market and the proliferation of small-scale enterprises involved in dependent sub-contractual or outwork relationships. In these petty enterprises women have differing degrees of autonomy over the productive process. Age, presence or absence of spouse and extent of access to capital are identified as important determinants of inclusion and exclusion from the diversity of different scale activities. The considerable complexities which exist within the different income earning activities such as domestic service and trading limit the utility of a dualist split, whether it be self-employment/wage employment or informal sector/formal. Identification, within each occupational category, of a continuum from waged to entirely unwaged productive work would appear to provide a more useful framework within which to understand the internal differentiation within each productive sector, and the nature of the relationship of women's work to the market.

A diversity of situations exists where women are forced out to work, regardless of the macro-economic situation. Where the lack of 'family wage' is not just a recessive tendency³ but a continual widespread phenomenon, women adopt a variety of alternative survival strategies to supplement family income: in the urban context access to land for cultivation is limited, if not non-existent and therefore recourse in times of need to subsistence cultivation often impossible⁴; unpaid domestic labour is so arduous and time-consuming that it does not present much possibility for 'taking up the slack' [Milkman 1976:81]⁵; multiple income-earning strategies including the whole household—men, women and children—are therefore the most common method of increasing income, which means that it is the household rather than the individual woman which provides the most useful unit of analysis, since the work of each member is dependent on and influenced by the work of the other members. The importance of women's work in situations such as this may result in a disjuncture between an ideology of sex

³The historical subsistence 'family wage' is defined as a single wage sufficient to maintain a working class family at a certain standard of living [see Himmelweit and Mohun, 1977].

⁴In rural areas where women have access to land, survival strategies during economic recession can include the subsistence production by women of agricultural goods and petty commodity production, thereby providing a part of the goods and services required for the maintenance of a fluctuating semi-proletarianised male labour force [see Deere 1976].

⁵Milkman describes how in the 1930s Depression in the USA women increased their range of domestic activities, and with the growing importance of unpaid household labour thereby 'took up the slack' in the economy during the crisis.

roles which emphasises women's reproductive and domestic roles, and an economic situation which necessitates their economic participation in income-earning activities. Where this occurs, it is important to examine the extent to which this economic change causes a shift in traditional ideological attitudes towards gender relations and women's 'double burden' of work.

Poor Urban Women in Indio Guayas, Guayaquil

Guayaquil is Ecuador's largest city, chief port and major centre of trade and industrialisation situated about 100 km upstream from the Pacific, with a population of over one million and 30 per cent of its annual growth produced by in-migration. The low-income population live either in the inner-city tenement slums or in the peripheral city mangrove swamps, known as the *suburbios*. This case study concerns a community known locally as Indio Guayas (after the local self-help political committee)⁶ living on the far edge of the *suburbios*, one hour's bus drive from the

city centre. The population has been motivated to 'invade' this municipal floodland and acquire 10 by 30 metre plots because they are thereby released from the high costs of rented accommodation and become the *de facto* owners of land on which they incrementally build their homes of split bamboo and wood [Moser 1981]. In the area surveyed, which stretched over a mile and a half and included families who had been there from ten years to two weeks, the only infrastructure provided in the earlier settled areas, was infill of *manzana* perimeter roads, installed without drainage pipes so that *manzana* interiors became stagnant cesspits. In the more recently settled areas a system of bamboo catwalks provides the means of communication. Throughout the area there is no piped water (it is irregularly delivered by water tankers) and electricity is pirated. The fact that the people pay

⁶The fieldwork for this case study was carried out between September 1977 and March 1978 and based on the anthropological techniques of participant observation while living in the community, and a 244 sample household survey undertaken by the author and Brian Moser. The research was financed by Granada Television, Manchester, as the basis for a documentary film on the survival strategies of a Third World urban community called 'People of the Barrio'. ATV.



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Carmelina cooking on kerosene stove inside her split bamboo home

no rates, taxes, electricity bills etc. has been seen as a mechanism of consolidation [McGee 1978] for low-income workers in Third World cities. It could equally be argued, however, that the fact that the vast majority of the labour force in Guayaquil lives in conditions such as these, lowers the value of labour power for capital, thus increasing the relative rate of surplus value for capitalist accumulation.

The population living in Indio Guayas is a very young one, with a mean age of 30 years for both men and women. This low-income squatter settlement is not representative of the city as a whole but of a young group at the lower end of unskilled labour. Consequently it excludes other sectors of the city's population, the professional and managerial classes, the white-collar workers or the

blue-collar . . . 'proletariat' (which) makes up under 5% of the urban economically-active population in Ecuador [OCN 1975:30]. Much more important is the 'subproletariat' [see Cueva 1973] who make up over 75% of the urban economically active population . . . a diverse group of small scale artisans, traders, transporters and repairers, and of workers in personal and domestic service

[Bromley 1977:42].

Although definable as a 'subproletariat' it is aspiringly 'petty' bourgeois and differentiated in socio-economic terms (74 per cent own radios, 34 per cent TV, and 38 per cent sewing machines). Very few couples go through a formal marriage ceremony and free unions (*compromisos*) predominate, with a number of different household arrangements identifiable:

a) men start one relationship, frequently with a slightly older woman (he may be 18 and she 23 already with one child), and then set up further households with younger women after a few years, dividing both their time and financial resources either equally or, more often, unequally between a number of households without ultimate responsibility for any. Expressive of the dominant ideology is men's legitimisation of this polygamy when they say, 'In Guayaquil there are seven women to each man. It's our duty to live like this', (the actual male/female ratio is 1:1.2);

b) serial monogamy, where both men and women (but more frequently the former) move through a number of *compromisos* in their lifetime. This is the most common pattern found and could be said to provide the norm of marital relationships in the *suburbios*. Both women and men initiate new *compromisos*. Children tend to remain with the mother, but may be sent to rural relatives if the new partner refuses to support the children of a previous *compromiso*. Most men involved in this type of relationship tend to have two during their lifetime, though anything up to five or

six can be found, in which case men end up living with a much younger woman;

c) older women on the ending of a *compromiso* often remain unattached, living with their children or other relatives who help provide financial support;

d) monogamy occurs but the fact that the data were collected at one point in time and not longitudinally makes it difficult to evaluate its extent;

e) the single category is much less represented in an upwardly aspiring peripheral squatter settlement than would be the case in the centre-city slums. Given the housing situation and shortage of resources, few single people live on their own, and those who do are most frequently older sons of families still living in the centre who sleep in the house to prevent invasion by others.

(The last three categories are particularly under-represented in this peripheral city sample.)

In addition to the steady, if unformalised, relationships identified above, mention must be made of casual relationships, most commonly prostitution, although the boundary between a) where a man simultaneously supports a number of women (who may or may not have his children) and paid prostitution, is not always clear cut. Although a few women living in Indio Guayas were identified (by other women) as working professionally as prostitutes, they were said to work in the city centre, where a number of known red light areas exist (the most famous of which, the Calle 19, was demolished by a recent Mayor in a city clean-up campaign). The fact that men go with prostitutes is openly discussed but it is seen as a male activity spatially separated from the residential area and associated with men's work in the city centre, where they may 'visit the theatre' before coming home.

In the survey the mean household size in Indio Guayas was 5.8 with both nuclear and extended families predominantly male headed (88 per cent) although this figure included polygamous relationships where the male is present only part of the week. Despite the complexities and lack of security in the different household arrangements, most adult women (88 per cent) live in a relationship involving some degree of financial commitment, even if irregular and minimal, from a man. 'Virtually all domestic labour in the household is done by women with the assistance of children. Men build or repair the house and sometimes haul water (deposited irregularly in water drums by tankers) but the heavy, monotonous routine of washing, cooking, shopping and child-minding is all 'women's work' made particularly laborious and time-consuming by the absence of infrastructure. Therefore in Indio Guayas there is a limit to the extent to which women

can 'substitute their own labour for goods and services they formerly purchased in the market-place' [Milkman 1976:82].

Given the limited extent to which women can substitute their own labour for purchasable commodities, two alternative strategies have developed. Firstly, in short term crises women turn to the complex interdependent mutual-aid linkages they develop with other women, both kin and neighbours. Mutual aid is formalised through *comadrasco* relationships, which are instituted at the birth of a child, after which the women involved address each other as *comadre*. These linkages are constantly reinforced by financial insecurity and a struggle for survival—the uncertain and unreliable nature of the labour market; the flexibility of free unions and women's constant awareness of the possibility of their partner's desertion; and the lack of infrastructure which dictates the arduous nature of women's domestic labour to such an extent that even water is an important and valuable commodity. Secondly, in the longer term women's survival strategies involve finding paid work.

The survey in Indio Guayas shows that virtually all workers are excluded from unionised 'proletarianised' employment, with the men in casual, unstable work in the census categories of artisan/machine operators (32 per cent) (tailor outworkers, mechanics and skilled, contract-hired construction workers) sellers (20 per cent) factory workers and labourers (18 per cent). Women work mainly in the census categories of personal services (39 per cent) (which include domestic servants, washerwomen and cooks) sellers (35 per cent) and artisans (14 per cent) (all dressmakers) (Table 1—see p29.) While a quarter of the women are illiterate, over half have completed primary education, a significant number of whom have a variety of further qualifications, suggesting that education itself is not the only determinant of job-entry. While it certainly determines entry at the post-university stage, there seems to be a middle area of office work and other related activities where other factors such as personal networks are equally important [Flinn and Jusenius 1976].

Women's Work in Indio Guayas

In Indio Guayas the manner in which women move in and out of wage work is determined by factors relating both to the wider economic situation such as changes in the labour market, as well as to personal ones relating to points in the life cycle. Here the crucial determinants are age, presence or absence of spouse, and the earning power of the household workers (ie the extent to which the woman's economic participation is necessary to provide a 'family wage'). Examination of the two main economic activities of women, domestic service and selling, assists in providing an understanding of the survival strategies of this group of

urban poor. It also shows the extent to which competition between men and women exists.

a) The domestic service life-cycle

A great deal has been written about domestic service as *the* 'women's work' of the Third World, as indeed it was in many advanced economies up until the Second World War. In Latin America the work of, for instance, Smith [1973] on Lima has contributed to the popular conception of the domestic servant as a young, rurally-born migrant, 'integrating' into the city, dressed in uniform, living in a middle-class household and utilising this as an opportunity for upward mobility within the wide spectrum of the working class.

Smith defines it as a 'bridging occupation', a transitory period rather than a lifetime career where a young girl works an average of seven years before 'dropping out' of the servant world and the labour market to run her own household and raise her own children' [Smith 1973:203]. With a continuous influx of young female migrants there is no problem in constantly replenishing the supply. Women certainly drop out of domestic service after a number of years, sometimes at marriage, sometimes at the birth of their second child [Moser 1977] but the idea that after a certain stage women simply 'devote themselves to their children' fails to identify the later stages in the life-cycles of ex-domestic servants.

The data from Indio Guayas show that a number of different stages of domestic service can be discerned in the life-cycle, and that it is useful to identify a continuum of activities, since a clear-cut division between wage-employment and self-employment does not always exist and consequently these types form the polarities of the continuum.

i) *Young women without dependants* may aspire to factory or shop work, but find employment primarily as domestic servants and to a lesser extent as washerwomen and sellers. In many respects they conform to Smith's model. They are uniform clad, live in a middle-class household, are paid a weekly wage and involved in a variety of duties. The under-utilisation of labour in Ecuador is sufficient for middle-class families frequently to have up to three or four domestic servants with a strict division of work between them, nannies, cook, general housemaids, etc with related wage differentials. However, they are by no means all migrants using the work experience in domestic service to 'integrate' into the city. Of my sample, 50 per cent of domestic servants are urban born. The level of education is an important determinant, influencing their choice of job within the range of economic activities open: those with most education take up dressmaking and those with least are forced into laundry work.

ii) *Women with dependants* find their options more limited. Non-residential work is difficult to find, so the number working as domestic servants drops radically. With childbearing and rearing responsibilities, large numbers of women initially have to withdraw from the labour force, this withdrawal being reinforced by male dominant ideology emphasising the reproductive and domestic roles of women. Those who re-enter the labour force do so for a variety of economically related reasons, but the crucial determinant of the type of work taken up is their marital status:

a) a woman within a *compromiso* will look for paid work either to supplement the inadequate earnings of her spouse or to take over the primary breadwinner role during periods when he is unemployed. Since so much male work is contract or cyclically based (ie the construction sector where men are hired on a job by job basis, and which is busy in the dry season and slack in the wet season), women frequently pick up and drop work, mainly laundering, as and when the household needs it and in direct relation to their husband's employment. 'My husband doesn't like

me working but he has to tolerate it until something comes up', is a constant remark, even of home-based work. It is often easier for a woman to find 'something', though it may well be of a very exploitative nature, while her spouse searches for a 'proper job'. A woman's ability to do this depends on having female kin, friends or children old enough to take over the child-care while she is out. In general, men do not take over domestic labour while they are not working, and therefore when women have the 'double burden' of productive and domestic work, this is considered temporary, although it may in fact continue for some time;

b) women whose *compromisos* have partially or totally broken down are generally forced to look for paid work. Men say, 'when a woman goes into laundry you know there is something wrong'. When a woman cannot survive economically, either because her spouse has set up another household and is giving her inadequate resources, or because he has deserted her, she has no option but to look for laundering, the most desperately exploitative work. It involves locking up children, travelling across town to collect laundry from a middle-class household, bringing it home to wash it, and then repeating the journey to return the laundered goods. A washerwoman is paid a piece rate, with the income from this work never fixed, and therefore although it is wage work it is more accurately categorised as casual out-work. A washerwoman washes in her own home, using her charcoal-filled iron with water delivered by the local tankers. Given the unreliability of the tanker water delivery, what might seem an incidental factor is in fact crucial since it frequently determines whether or not the woman can wash, and consequently her reputation for reliability. The fact that many upper-income households with washing machines still employ out-work washerwomen for everything except linen, on the basis that a washing-machine ruins personal clothing, is an indication of the state of the labour market and the concentration of income in the city.

It is important to emphasise that the *suburbio* itself is heterogeneous in socio-economic terms, with female kin and neighbours (particularly those linked through formalised *comadrasco* relationships) helping each other in times of need⁷. In a hot sticky climate where washing is very onerous, those with resources earned in other activities pay their neighbours the meagre piece rates for washing their clothes. Although this is not very widespread it is undertaken as a conscious strategy to enable single women with

⁷ In a detailed analysis of one street in Indio Guayas it was found that 26 per cent of the respondents had nuclear or extended family living in the same street (of which 68 per cent were extended family) while 54 per cent had them in the survey area.



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Carmelina washes other people's clothes helped by one of her eight children.

very young babies to avoid having to look for work across town. With socio-economic differentials between households very limited and desertion widespread, the dominant motivation between the women concerned is mutual support.

iii) *Older women without dependants*, even when no longer constrained by child-minding activities, are rarely able to move out of laundry, lacking the skills and contacts to move into factory or shop work, where a young workforce is preferred. Reluctant to take residential jobs as domestic servants, they tend to take casual, part-time work in cleaning, laundering and cooking. An alternative strategy is childminding in the *suburbios*, older women thereby releasing younger women to enter more lucrative shop work, or on occasions living in domestic service. This tends to be done on a kin basis and represents unaged labour, contributing to the reproduction of the labour power while allowing for a household strategy of multiple income-earners.

b) **Retail selling activities**

Unlike domestic service, which in Indio Guayas is almost entirely 'women's work', the same strict sexual division of labour does not exist in retail selling activities where by contrast both men and women work. The

extent to which men and women compete in retail selling, and men, in this competitive situation, utilise an ideology of male dominance to exclude women from the more lucrative areas of selling, is shown by more detailed examination of the different categories of retail selling, and the identification of the extent to which women's work is waged. The characteristics of retail selling are somewhat complex because they are dependent on both *what* is sold (cooked food, uncooked food and other durables), and *where* it is sold (front-room shop, a fixed location outside the home, and mobile selling).

i) *Front-room shops* Women prefer retail selling to domestic service, particularly after the birth of children, since it can be carried on in or just outside the home. Front-room shops are the most common form of retailing, with a diversity of goods sold but mainly staples such as sugar, rice, bananas, or specialist goods such as cotton threads or ice cubes. Some capital is necessary to start such an enterprise and women who set up shop in this way must have access to some funds provided either by savings, other kin or their spouse. Consequently this is the occupation that many of those without capital and in laundry work aspire to. Front-room shops are primarily run by women, to supplement family



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Having no running water, their drinking water is delivered by tanker and is distributed into drums and cans, often with disastrous results.

income while involved in child-minding and domestic labour. Competition is ruthless and women without particular skills frequently become insolvent. Front-room shops open and close with great rapidity. The extent to which women themselves see this as 'work' depends on the scale of turnover and the number of hours they spend on it. A woman with a large number of young children is primarily involved in domestic labour and sees the small-scale selling of, for instance, bananas (bulk-bought green locally off a wholesale lorry and allowed to ripen) as 'a bit on the side', while a woman with a small shop who builds up a clientele and works throughout the day sees herself as working. Where wholesale buying in the enterprise involves travelling to the city centre it is generally undertaken by the man.

ii) *Fixed location shops* The larger 'corner' shops selling both durable staples and fruit and vegetables, which get the bulk of the trade primarily because of their reliability, with prices standardised over time, require much larger capital resources and tend to be owned by men and operated mainly as household enterprises. These enterprises survive in the longer term. Some division of labour occurs: the man does all the wholesale buying in the centre, and deals with commercial travellers, while the wife does the majority of the selling in the shop itself, assisted by children in peak periods. Although corner shops are not categorised as 'men's work', bar ownership, a lucrative profession in low-income communities, is certainly considered so because of its association with drinking and, above all, prostitution—although in Indio Guayas bars are primarily where men drink or buy drink. A few older women with the necessary capital, provided either by a lover, or saved, do manage to enter this, but it is always at the risk of general neighbourhood disapproval.

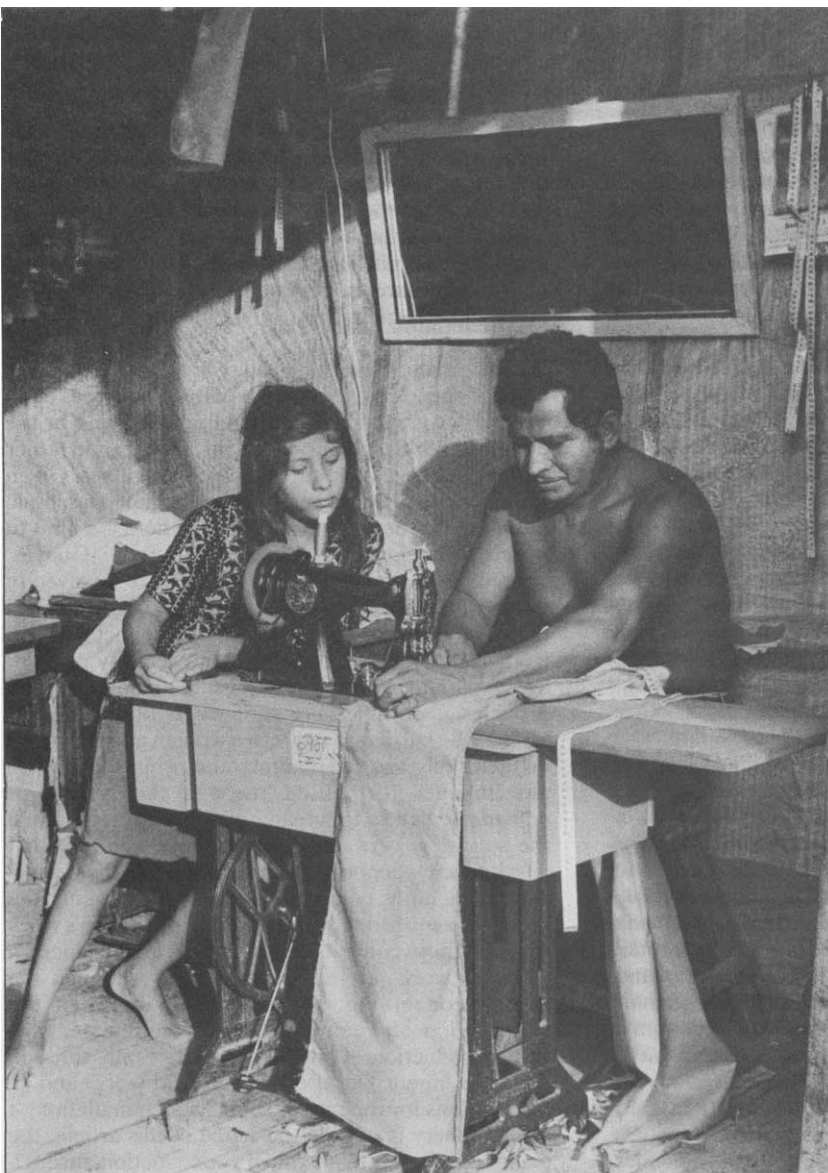
iii) *Mobile selling* In Indio Guayas mobile sellers (*ambulantes*) selling clothing, kitchen items, fresh food such as fish as well as cooked foods are mainly men, while women generally operate fixed location enterprises. This is partly for the practical reason that it can effectively be combined with child-minding, but is also legitimised in ideological terms. The fact that 'going in the street' is connected with prostitution allows men, operating in a competitive situation, to restrict if not effectively exclude women. While fixed stalls are exposed to the uncontrollable competition of neighbours, mobile sellers have the advantage of alternative selling locations. It is in the area of cooked food selling that the competitive relationship between men and women is most severe. There is sufficient evidence to show that cooked food selling, unlike kiosk and other selling, is primarily a female economic activity [Flinn and Jusenius

1976]. Within the *suburbios* cooked food selling represents an important source of income, since lack of electricity makes cooking a time-consuming activity. This is augmented by a constant demand for cooked food from bachelor men who do not cook and rarely eat at home. Where the food is sold freshly cooked, such as fried fish or bananas, the stall is fixed and the enterprise is operated by a woman. Where the food is prepared in advance it is prepared by a woman but sold by a man. This is an example of a man's enterprise including the necessity for 'woman's work', for men in the *suburbios* never cook, and it is their wives who prepare the food they sell. Where this occurs the woman's work is unwaged and generally not perceived by her as work. Marinated fish sellers (*ceviche*) provide an example of a structured division of labour within a household enterprise. Men buy the fish at the wholesale market at 1 a.m. (going in communally hired pick-ups from the area) and the women, woken on their return, prepare and cook it between 2 a.m. and 5 a.m., sometimes with the help of children, while their spouses go back to sleep. The men then get up and sell it on street corners, their clients being workers *en route* to work, while their wives start the daily domestic duties. The whole process is then repeated in the afternoon for workers returning home. The enterprise cannot function without household labour, although the women involved do not see themselves as 'working'. It is important to add that men in occupations such as this tend to take it up and drop it, depending on the employment situation, time of year etc (for instance there is a much greater supply of *ceviche* sellers in the wet season when construction work is limited). When they move into other employment their wives simply revert to their domestic labour, or look for laundering work, but have no control of the enterprise.

c) **Dressmakers**

Dressmakers are separated from other women in terms of their level of education, income and social class and are much smaller as a group (14 per cent) than either domestic servants or sellers⁶. They are almost all artisans, providing dresses, skirts, and blouses for local women and children, and occasionally shirts for men—each garment made to measure to the individual client's specifications, with the latter providing the material. Tailors in the *suburbios* are all men, and make trousers for both men and women, either as artisan production or, more commonly, as out-workers to tailorshops in the centre.

⁶Since dressmakers and tailors form a very distinct group, differing from the majority of workers in terms of skills, status and class, they really form the basis of a separate paper and are only mentioned briefly here by way of comparison.



A tailor with one of his daughters. He makes trousers at home and his employer sells them in his shop in the city centre.

Dressmakers and more particularly tailors (of whom there are proportionally many more) have to learn to survive in a highly competitive environment where the potential for expansion is limited both by the seasonal nature of the market, and the strength of competition, with the constant tendency to undercut prices. While dressmakers work independently, relying only on the occasional assistance of children, tailoring involves areas which are considered 'women's work' and a clear division of labour in the enterprise can be identified. Tailors are primarily out-workers for larger scale workshops in the city centre, and work at piece rates, sewing the cut fabric into trousers, and less frequently, jackets. They work locally as artisans making articles to specific order (when they cut the cloth as well) although this is very much a secondary

income source. Two areas of tailoring considered 'women's work' are handsewing of hems, buttons and zips, and ironing. Wherever possible women are trained to do this work, either wives or other female kin (bachelors, for instance, will take this work to be done by female kin, when eating in the latter's house). Where the wife is already a dressmaker she will do this in addition to her own work, although there is no reciprocal exchange on the part of her husband.

Conclusion

The description of the diversity of economic activities in the two sectors where the majority of women in Indio Guayas participate economically—domestic service and retail selling—indicates the limitations of defining their work in terms of a dualist dichotomy

such as the wage sector/self-employment or formal/informal sector division. Within both sectors, as indeed with dressmaking, it is possible to identify a continuum, with totally waged employment at one end, and unwaged work at the other, with accompanying degrees of autonomy over the productive process. Rather than seeing women as moving in and out of the labour force, it is more useful to recognise that women always work, but at different stages in their life-cycle move along this continuum, with the extent to which their work is remunerated differing according to the stage. Both age and the presence or absence of a spouse are the crucial determinants at the personal level which influence the manner in which women work, the types of activities they become involved in, and when this occurs.

In Indio Guayas the sexual segregation of occupations creates some inflexibilities in the market. Despite competition from men in some situations this prevents the expulsion of women. Thus men do not work in domestic service (cooking, cleaning and washing) although they may work as gardeners, and in other particular forms of 'men's work' within the domestic arena. When men are unemployed, looking for work, or involved in very unremunerative economic activities, their wives are frequently forced to look for work in domestic service. In this way women's work is used as an adjustment mechanism in the market. There is no question of men substituting women in domestic service which consequently remains a protected area of 'women's work'. In other economic activities, particularly retail selling, a rigid division of labour does not exist and both men and women compete to work here with their numbers fluctuating, relative to the wider economic situation. In the area where there is greatest potential for competition between men and women, gender is used as an essential element in the division of labour, with women allocated to the less innovative activities. What emerges is the use of space defined in gender terms, and particularly obvious in the case of mobile selling where men, assisted by an ideology of male dominance, try to exclude women from the most profitable areas of selling by associating 'going in the street' with prostitution. In the process of 'masculinisation' of a traditional area of 'women's work', cooked food selling, men are in fact totally reliant on the household enterprise and the unwaged work of women in order to cook the goods which they then sell in the market. Women perceive this as an extension of domestic labour while men continue to control the financial aspects of the enterprise, and to change occupations as and when it suits them.

In peripheral economies, such as Ecuador, where only a small proportion of the active labour is absorbed into the industrial wage sector and the underutilisation

of labour is sufficient to ensure that wages are maintained below the value of labour power, low-income families are forced to adopt a variety of multiple earning strategies. At the household level, the decision to 'invade' and squat on peripheral swamp land and live in intensely primitive conditions with only the rudiments of infrastructure is designed to avoid paying rent, taxes and electricity.

With the male household head paid a 'single wage', the family depends on the income-earning activities of all members with potential earning power living in the household, which includes not only mother and father but also teenage children and elderly relatives. Given the mean size of families and the instability of consensual unions in this peripheral settlement, there is a limit to which this strategy is effective. In Indio Guayas, consequently, the majority of women are involved in different domestic related income earning activities throughout their adult lives. Despite the fact that this work includes low rates of pay, no security of work and exploitative labour relations, the income earned provides a considerable proportion of the 'family wage'. The particular strategies women adopt depend on their skills, age and marital status, while the mutual-aid linkages formalised through the system of *comadrasco* allow for greater mobility and strengthen the solidarity between these women. The fact that despite socio-economic differentiations, all the women exist in a fairly comparable situation prevents the more extreme forms of privatisation of women's work found in those contexts where there is less reliance on women's work for the 'family wage'. Although the debate concerning the relationship between the contribution of women's work for the maintenance and reproduction of labour power (not only through domestic labour but also through paid work) and its implications for the rate of capitalist accumulation of the periphery is outside the scope of this article, the evidence suggests that women's contribution, through a variety of wage labour, petty commodity and unwaged forms of work, acts as an important mechanism which allows men to sell their labour power to the capitalist sector for less than a subsistence family wage.

table 1

**Breakdown of occupational categories,
Indio Guayas, 1980**

census occupational category	women		men	
	no	%	no	%
Professional:				
teacher	1	1	1	1.4
nursing auxiliary			2	
Managers			3	1.4
Office workers	1	1	10	4.6
Sellers				
mobile:				
cooked food	1		10	
uncooked food	1		4	
other	1		8	
shop in home:				
cooked food	6		1	
uncooked food	17	36	2	19.7
other	1		1	
shop outside home:				
cooked food	4		3	
uncooked food	2		5	
other	1		2	
shop wage labour			6	
Agricultural workers	2	2	4	1.8
Transport			18	8.4
Artisan/machine operator:				
shoes	1	14	5	
tailor/dressmaker	12		14	
mechanic			10	31.9
skilled construction			26	
carpenter/laquerer			13	
Other factory workers			21	9.8
Labourers			21	9.8
Personal services:				
domestic servants	9			
washerwomen	22			
cooks	4	39		
hairdresser	1			
security services			6	
municipal workers			7	6.1
Other	6	7	10	4.6
Total	93	100	213	99.5
Not working	137*	59.6	88	38
Sample survey total	230		213	

*This table excludes unwaged women's work in household enterprises. The inclusion of such categories as women cooking food for their husband to sell, or wives sewing for their husband's tailors would have considerably lowered this total figure.

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